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MDiv Thesis
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TOWARD A PROTESTANT THEOLOGY SUPPORTING IMAGES

I am a photographer. I am a minister. I am a minister who does ministry by being a photographer. And yet, as a Protestant I am cautious and skeptical about the theological status of images. Throughout the history of the church, the status of images has been a battleground between faithful theologians. The debate most often hinges on the theological issue of idolatry. The debate then quickly leaps to the realm of ethics and what ought be done about the images. Iconoclasts (image-destroyers) and Iconophiles (image-lovers) use the theological arguments to justify their physical, concrete actions of relating to images. While the Protestant Christian tradition is by no means the only tradition to contain iconoclasts, it certainly has had a share of them. I take issue with the theological ground upon which iconoclasts base their actions. As such, in my paper I hope to address such theological claims, offering them a fair portrayal but still showing that throughout the course of Christian history, there have been faithful theological arguments that have acknowledged and answered iconoclastic objections to images.

No paper on this topic would be adequate without first defining the major topic involved. The concept of "image" needs some clarity in order to be intelligible throughout this short discussion. Its definition will not survive outside the realm of this paper, but it will at least give thoughtful acknowledgment to some of the wider arguments involved, while also giving clean boundaries to the scope of my writing. I will use a group of authors I affectionately call "image

theorists” to help me explain what I mean when I use the term “image.” These authors are relevant not only because of their constructions and critiques of images, but also because their writings all touch on the interplay between religion and the visual arts. While all of them are “secular” (not writing from a religious perspective), they all consider the interplay between religion and the visual arts important enough to address - as do I.

After defining my topic, I’m going to describe the images present in a congregation I know well. I grew up at Norwalk Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Norwalk, Iowa. The church is a part of the wider Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) tradition and is Protestant, through and through. Many of its members are ex-Catholics, ex-Lutherans and ex-evangelicals, so its theological language is often ambiguous and mixed. Its a church of members from many traditions. The symbols Norwalk Christian Church chooses to represent in its images are intentional, and the images shape the people who gaze upon them. While I cannot prove this within this paper, I will give examples of shaping that I know well: how the images have shaped how I see!

Even though Norwalk Christian Church shaped much of how I grew to love images, it represents only a small portion of Christianity. To give some wider context for why this theology matters, I will give an abridged history of Christian thought regarding images. Starting even before Christ with the second commandment in the Decalogue, I’ll trace the theological tensions of surrounding “graven images” up until our modern time. Finally, I’ll describe Paul Tillich’s device of the “symbol” and use it to show some of the theological resources that can undergird a theology of images.

I want to admit from the outset that I try to intentionally avoid *aesthetic* or *ethical* struggles surrounding images. While these struggles are surely important (and often more important than the theological objections), they often distract in discernment processes. When Christian individuals or groups make decisions about images, the aesthetic and ethical questions can create familiar ruts: "it's not beautiful enough!" "can anything good come from an image?" "it's *just* a picture, it can't do anything!" "God doesn't care how images look anyway, God cares about what's in our hearts." People who sympathize with iconoclasts may object to my bracketing off such discussions by arguing that I strip much of the iconoclasts' argument since the actions they take are *fully ethical*. I do not deny this. But behind their actions is a theological conviction; it is that conviction I try to address. Every Christian discerning about the use of images should consider the ethical, aesthetic and theological bases for their positions. But in this paper, I try to stay focused on theology.

I should also admit from the outset that much of the theological work in this paper is a new adventure for me. This project began as "a sacramental understanding of images." I did an extensive reading of Karl Rahner's and Edward Schillebeeckx's writings on sacramental theology as well as Rahner's theology of the symbol. I was trying to answer a question of how the practice of viewing images can be a sacramental encounter with God. Such a question is one of ethics, and while I think it is a very important question, it uses a language foreign to Protestant churches with Reformed theological sensibilities, such as the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). Had I created this project as a devotional guide for Roman Catholics, Episcopalians or even some Lutherans, the language of "sacrament" would have been second nature. But for

Disciples wondering about images, learning the theological arguments for and against images is more important than also learning the secondary language of sacramentality.

What is an image?

The word “image” can designate many things. An anecdotal narrative in a sermon can be an image. A mental recalling that is unmediated through the physical organs of the eyes can be an image. The technical projection of a cinematic masterpiece can be an image. Even the moods and feelings conjured by music and poetry can be images (since, after all, they spawn within the imagination). None of these are what I mean when I use “image” in this paper.

> *An image is a still object which a viewer can see through his or her physical sight for as little or as long as he or she desires.*

This definition points to four areas that need further definition: static-ness, object-ness, the practice of seeing, and the duration of seeing.

- Images are static. They keep their identity by not changing. When they change, they are still an image, but they are no longer the same image. So a movie is made of images, and seeing the movie is not an act of seeing an image but an act of seeing many images. I do not include movies in my definition of image because viewing movies is different from viewing an image. It requires a different set of presuppositions about what is seeable. With moving images and with sequences of images, the mind straps on the element of time to create a narrative structure. Multiple images beg the question from the mind: what happens in the gaps between the images? This is important to keep in mind, especially with stained glass installations in churches. Images are static in nature; if they seem dynamic, that dynamism comes from the viewer.

- Images are objects. Actions are done to them. They are viewed, stared at, gazed upon, glimpsed, avoided, and even scorned. Objects have bodies, shape, and figure. Objects have dimensionality and presence. James Elkins, an art historian, writes about the nature of seeing objects and provides some stark conclusions about the "objective nature" of images. "Each object has a certain force, a certain way of resisting or accepting my look and returning that look to me."[1] Some of the ways images do this is by their content, their aesthetic facets, and by their material medium. An image containing human figure representations in the medium of stained glass has a very different presence than a design of a corporate logo screen-printed on a t-shirt. Yet their material medium does not distract from their main goal: to be seen. Elkins and fellow writer W. J. T. Mitchell emphasize this turn in the subject-object language when applied to images. Images are objects, but as objects they still have desires. Images desire to be seen. That is their reason for existence. Images, if they could verbally speak, would shout, "I'm here and I have something to show you!"

- If images want to be seen, then there has to be someone to see them. Images need viewers. And the way a person sees (the type of looking) is at the heart of objections to images. Often the objection to images' content is really an objection to how the images improperly distort the practice of looking. And the practice of looking depends on many factors, of which the content of the image is only a minor one. Social context matters: I look at pictures differently when I am alone than when I am with friends or strangers. I look differently at images in Catholic churches when listening to homilies than I look at

[1] Elkins 70.

images in Protestant churches when listening to sermons; there are implicit rules about where attention - and gaze - is allowed to find its rest within the scope of the worship.

- "... for as little or as long as desired." Images last longer than the attention of the viewer. They can be looked at repeatedly. The widest sense of what I consider an image for this paper is found in architecture. The design and shape of environment testifies to the aspirations of the people it shapes as they live within its bounds. It is a reciprocal effect: the people shape and are shaped by the structure with which they choose to surround themselves. The viewings of this architecture are repeated, and almost always along similar patterns; it takes an intentional choice to view a space differently - as it does to view any images differently. I am not sure there exists a "narrowest" sense of what I consider an image. Nanotechnology, electron microscopy, and photography have given evidence of ordered beauty at the smallest levels. But whether a person is looking at the grandeur of an architectural environment or at the tiny ordering of God's creation, they are looking at an image.

Images can be known to be images because of their static-ness and their object-ness; but images are also images because they are looked at. And with that look is always an element of desire. The act of looking is an attempt by the biological organs in conjunction with the mind to make sense of what is seen. Every gaze - every look, is built upon this desire to create order out of the elements in the image. This desire created the need for devices of meaning, which this paper later identifies and explores as "symbols."

This definition of image is by no means conclusive. It privileges the viewer of images over the images' creator. I do not define an image by whether it has been consecrated as such by its creator, the Church, or its viewers -- I define an image on its relation to the viewer and the practices through which viewers engage it. I also ignore issues of images' reproduction, how well those images resemble reality, and images' power to arouse or disgust. All of these issues are important, but they are too overwhelming and too distracting for this project.[2]

My "Token" Church: Images in Norwalk Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Norwalk, IA

Kenan Osborne, a Roman Catholic sacramental theologian, rightly insists that there is no such thing as a generic baptism. Every baptismal event is separate and unique. Context matters. He gives this post-modern critique a label from Duns Scotus: *Haecceitas*. Roughly translated, he says it means there is a character of "thisness" about the particular instances. The same can be said of images. There is no such thing as an image, devoid of particularities. As my definition of image has made explicit, images cannot be understood without understanding the encounter/ viewing of them. To say anything intelligible about the image, I must give the pre-conditions upon which it exists. I must explain the history, the cultural context, and how the images want to be seen. When I appropriate Osborne's charge, I must give an account that recognizes:

> each [image viewing] is an existential event, an existential action ... an individualized, historically discrete, temporally unrepeatable moment in the life of an individual, of a particular community of Christians, and [potentially] of the temporal-historical presence of an active God.[3]

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[2] David Freeberg addresses these issues better than most of the image theorists I read in his capstone volume, cited in the bibliography.

[3] Osborne 58.

Osborne's critique provides some nice boundaries for what my theology of images can hope to accomplish. I cannot give a systematic backing of all images; I cannot even give an account of an "essence" of images. Every viewing, and therefore every image, is different. And likewise, Heraclitus' stream[4] lives on once I claim that every viewer is different as well. So, in this spirit, here is an accounting of the images of Norwalk Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)[5] in Norwalk, IA. This comes wholly from my perspective, though I have had conversations with several congregational members and leaders in re-creating my memories of its images and how they came to be.

Norwalk is a suburb of Des Moines, Iowa. It is predominantly Caucasian (~95%), as is much of Iowa. Much of its residents are commuting employees of Des Moines employers. At least 90% (if not more) of the residents live in stand-alone houses, as there are few apartment, condos, or joined-structure housing options. The NCC population fits these demographics as well. The Reverends Dayna Kinkade and Amy Spangler-Dunning lead the congregation and both live with their families in towns other than Norwalk. Around 75% of the congregation lives within Norwalk city limits and the surrounding rural area. The rest of the congregation commutes from neighboring suburbs and the city. The church currently has between 150-175 people attending weekly. It currently has two services each Sunday morning: 8:30 and 10:30 as well as a 6:00 p.m. service.

The first church building NCC met in was built in Norwalk in 1872. In 1961 it broke ground for the current building on the corner of Main Street and North Avenue. The building included

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[4] Heraclitus was a Greek philosopher famous for his observations on life's constant state of flux. He believed identity was constantly changing so that, if a human walked into a river they would not be the same and the river would not be the same, since both changed since previous times.

[5] For the rest of this paper, I will often use NCC instead of typing out the full congregation name.

educational classrooms and what is now the fellowship hall, which was where the congregation worshipped. In 1971, they broke ground to build a sanctuary connected to the existing church building (it was finished in 1972). The sanctuary is roughly double the size of the fellowship hall and is where the congregation currently worships. At the time, the congregation used yellow-tinted glass in the sanctuary windows facing north. Following, I describe the specific images currently in NCC's worship space and how they came to be.

The sanctuary faces east, the cardinal direction for many church orientations. While this tradition goes back to the use of light in medieval stained glass (where light created mystical experiences as the sun rose), NCC chose the orientation because it was building the sanctuary room onto the current building and making the church closer to the street. The sanctuary originally had bright red carpet, but has since changed it to a neutral cream/gray pattern. The

sanctuary is paneled with a light shade of wood paneling, both on its walls and on the ceiling, which joins the walls and vaults to an apex point. Beams divide the sanctuary into sections both vertical and along the ceiling; all of the beams are black, providing a nice contrast to the wood paneling. The 5-sided shape of the sanctuary extends the from the rear entrance down the nave and finishes at a wall with an embedded, recessed baptismal pool. Pews in two rows shape the congregational seating area with a center aisle splitting the middle of the sanctuary, and outside aisles providing access to shortened wheelchair-accessible rows. The sanctuary is lit with overhead hanging cylinders enclosed with frosted glass and open tops and bottoms, which let the light serve mostly as bounced light from the ceilings and floors instead of a harsh direct light that blinds.

On the left (north) side of the sanctuary, when looking toward the front, there are five stained glass sets of windows. The windows were designed by James “Jim” Graham, a local artist and the husband of the congregation’s first woman elder, Dorothy Graham[6] (who became an elder in 1972). Funding for the windows began as a memorial gift at the death of Jennie McAfee, a long-time member of the church. Even though her memorial funds only included money for one window set, the groups and members of the church donated money during the construction process so that all five windows could be purchased. Jennie McAfee died in December, 1976 and the windows were made in 1977 and dedicated in worship on January 29, 1978.

[6] Dorothy was an entrepreneur in all of life. She was the founder of the town’s weekly paper and funded it with her own private resources. The paper’s design has not changed since.

The stained glass windows primarily use color schemes of yellow, green, and blue. Inside of each window section are symbols, which the congregation and artist Jim Graham chose. The window nearest the entrance portrays two stones with Hebrew letters, representing the decalogue and the Old Testament. There is also, interestingly, a red lightning bolt striking the first stone tablet (maybe representing God's powerful actions?). The second window has a star above a manger, representing the birth of Jesus. The third window has the dove above a stream of flowing water, and represents the baptism of Jesus by John in the Jordan. (Growing up, I thought it was a statue of a bird with a stream of water flowing from it.) The fourth window shows the red chalice with the white cross of St. Andrew on it, representing not only the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), but also the last supper where Jesus ate with his disciples. The furthest window portrays three red crosses with a red lightning bolt going to the center cross; this was meant to represent the crucifixion, but the historical document also says the red is supposed to

indicate Christ's resurrection.[7] The stained glass design always draws the eye up, toward the center symbols in the windows. Its wide ribbons of color become smaller as they move higher in the window, drawing the viewer's eye to the symbol they wrap behind. In modern art styles, the windows suggest the solid square colors of Piet Mondrian with the flowing curves of Joan Miró.

The stained glass windows end where the chancel area begins. The chancel area is the space surrounding the communion table. In the original design of the sanctuary, raised steps led to the chancel area of the east end of the sanctuary. The choir sat in pews on the north and south sides (looking at the baptismal pool, on the left and right) and faced each other throughout the service. When it came time for the anthem, the choir moved to the center of the chancel area, faced the congregation, and sang. During the rest of the service, they sang from their seats, with much of the sound going toward each other rather than to or with the congregation.

In 1993, the church decided to unite the choir into one seating arrangement, facing the congregation. The four rows make up the left (north) third of the chancel area. In the center of the chancel is the communion table, and behind it is the baptismal pool with curtains closed around it most Sundays (usually baptisms only occur once a year). On the right (south) side of the chancel are portable seats for the ministers as well as the pulpit and the organ.

The 1993 chancel remodeling process was a growing time for the congregation. While many of the church members, including the choir members, were frustrated with the processing and parading of the choir, the chancel area became more closed off and separate from the rest of the sanctuary's pews once the design changed. There was a literal three-foot wall put up between the

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[7] While this color symbolism didn't (and doesn't) make sense to me besides connotations of "power" and "might" with red, the document goes on to admit that the red color was expensive to use, so the congregation asked the designer to use it sparingly and only on its most important symbols. The red symbols are the birth of Christ, communion, and the death and resurrection of Christ.

chancel and the pews. In addition to that discomfort, the chancel area was dark and needed more light.

A congregation member, Randy Kinzer, owned an advertising sign company and spear-headed much of the redesign. One of Randy's employees took the designs from Jim Graham's stained glass windows and created a design for a stained glass window in the front of the sanctuary with a cross as the center symbol. Jim had died in the 1980s (after being the congregation's first elder-emeritus -- a title given to elders when ailing), and Dorothy had moved out of town to be closer to family. Randy and NCC's minister, Pat Nixon, went to Dorothy and asked if a newly designed window could use Jim's previous style. She agreed and the window was presented to the congregation as a tribute to Jim. So when the chancel was redone, the stained glass window was installed above the baptismal pool where the darker paneling used to be. Rather than opening the exterior wall (and finding a way to help the light travel through several storage crawl-spaces), the designers decided to use a series of recessed fluorescent lights to illuminate the window.

The irony in the process of designing and approving the window was how the process evaded fervent objections by some congregational members. At least six members, all between 60 and 90 years old, objected to the stained glass cross installation because it took the focal point of the sanctuary away from the communion table. Their argument was: "the reason the choir was being moved was so that their pageantry would no longer obstruct the communion table -- and now the plan was to put a brightly lit piece of glass above the table. The communion table was the center of worship, and the stained glass window drew the attention away from it."[8] In an aesthetic

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[8] Telephone calls with three members on March 31, 2009.

sense, they were right. At the time, the communion table was a magnet for the eye, and led the eye to the baptismal pool behind it. There was an architectural impetus for "open communion" (the practice of allowing baptized and non-baptized people to share in communion); the table leads to the water. But their objections tempered when Dorothy Graham gave her permission to use Jim's style; Dorothy was a saint of the church and had the love of all the objectors. It also did not hurt that one of the carpenters doing the work was John Lester, a 34-year-old member who had joined the church as a youth group member without any of his family attending. He was one of the congregation's beloved, and he was someone many of the objectors had mentored through the years. Many of the objections dwindled with the wider support for the window.

More recent developments than the stained glass include the use of fabric and textile images. Mary Johnson is an amateur artist who specializes in creating textile banners for the congregation. She started making them two years after joining the church, in 1989, at the request of the worship committee chairwoman who said "our walls need some color." Her banners evolved over the years. Mary started using templates from liturgical banner booklets, but quickly created her own templates from pictures and even just verbal descriptions by the church leaders requesting the banners. To date, she has created at least 25 banners (most within a three-

Mary Johnson's "Baptism" Banner

foot by four-foot dimension). Her newest creation is a larger banner using art that symbolizes the Disciples' practice of "open communion." The banner is so large that the normal wall space for banners will not be adequate space. Instead, the banner will hang on a large wooden, rustic cross that stands in front of the right (south) portion of the chancel. The cross, also an addition since the chancel was redesigned, was installed for an Easter celebration ... and it never came down. The myths for its arrival are many, but popular versions include: the cross was replacing a smaller wooden cross already present; the cross was up for Easter and when leaders were ready to take it down, they did not know where/how/if they should store it.

Mary Johnson's "Open Communion" Banner

NCC has more images in the sanctuary than I have mentioned. There is a relief sculpture of the Last Supper, resembling da Vinci's character layout. There are flags: both the Star Spangled Banner and the "Christian flag" (primarily white, with a blue rectangle in the upper-left corner and a red vertical cross within the rectangle). There are modern portraits of Jesus in the neighboring hallways and rooms (including takeoffs of the infamous Warner Sallman painting).

I called NCC my "token" congregation intentionally. Tokens do not deserve the pejorative connotation they often bear. To say something is "just an image" (or "just a token") is to mistake the power of the image as something insufficient for shaping the viewer. Susan Sontag, a novelist, cultural commentator, and more importantly, a critic[9] of photography, keenly notices in a completely separate endeavor:

> Let the atrocious images haunt us. Even if they are only tokens, and cannot possibly encompass most of the reality to which they refer, they still perform a vital function. The images say: This is what human beings are capable of doing - may volunteer to do, enthusiastically, self-righteously. Don't forget.[10]

Tokens, like images, shape their viewers. My descriptions of Norwalk Christian Church's images cannot adequately represent the reality of Norwalk Christian Church, nor serve as case examples of all images used within the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). But they can serve as a model for the community I remember, which chose its own images to represent the faith its members shared. Its discernment about *which* images was never transparent; it was translucent, at best. But as my token congregation, Norwalk Christian Church illuminates the breadth of what can count as images and shows how Protestant sensibilities of grounding and critique help the congregation remain faithful in their use of images.

An Abridged History of Christian Thought about Images

In this section, I hope to give a very abridged survey on the theological issues surrounding the status of images throughout Christian history. While this will by no means be a comprehensive study, it is meant to make clear the historical trajectory that culminates in a key

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[9] In every sense of the term 'critic'. While she lampoons photography in her 1977 essay collection, *On Photography*, she champions the medium for its ability to shape ethical responses to war and cruelty in her 2003 volume, *Regarding the Pain of Others*.

[10] Sontag 115.

point Paul Tillich makes about the theological need for symbols and how symbols avoid becoming idolatrous themselves. I break Christian history into 500-year chunks[11] and cite some of the oft-cited theologians and their opinions on images. These theologians were being quoted when each later generation faced a resurgence of image controversy, so it is important to understand their contexts. Historical context is different for every one of these theologians; almost none of them would have qualms with images if their definition of image was a wide as mine, as described at the beginning of this paper. But these particular theologians' arguments are often repeated context-free by current thinkers in today's completely *different* context. For as much context as I give these historical thinkers, I hope to also limit the ways they can be used as arguments against images in today's contexts.

Christianity inherited the contentious issue of images from Judaism. Ancient Israelites also faced the question: are our images, indeed, idols? Within Judaism there was a strict injunction in Exodus 20.4: "You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth." Images of God or of gods were always out of the question. But were all images bad? The verdict for such a question rests in exegesis: is the verse an augmentation of the first commandment, or is it an entirely separate commandment? If avoiding idols was a way of wholly loving God, then images not trying to depict God could still be fine. If it was a separate commandment, then the distrust of the visible was separate from, but fully in conjunction with, practicing the first commandment. The question of images' theological status was by no means settled.

[11] ... for no major reason other than the chunks are helpful for managing the retelling of the theological conversations.

Within early Christian thought the question took on a different dimension: the incarnation. What happened in the incarnation? How did it impact the debate on images (and what images are made of, namely 'matter')? The incarnation is a broad topic, but my vantage point focuses arguments for or against images based on God choosing to become human. The arguments center on two verses.

> Jn 1.18: No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.
>
> and
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> 1 Jn. 4.12-16: Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us. By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world. God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.

While both verses claim God is not directly viewable by sight, God is still present and made known through what we see. God is visible through others; but other what? The answers from the Johannine texts lend themselves to both iconophiles (image-lovers) and iconoclasts (image-destroyers). Iconophiles can claim from these texts that the things humans see (Christ, each other, visible pious practices) mediate God. Iconoclasts may admit that God may live within all of the above, but they can still claim that none of them *are* God, and therefore none of them should be worshipped, revered, nor gazed upon as one would revere, worship, or try to gaze upon God.

In the first five centuries of Christian history, the context for Christian writers was one of opposition to, then as leaders of, and then as survivors of the imperial culture in which they lived. This half-millennium included Christians distinguishing themselves from a) their Jewish roots, b) pagan syncretists importing some idols into the Christian life, c) sects of Christianity

who philosophically distrusted any "matter" in the created world, d) sects of Christianity who worshipped images without any fear of idolatry. Within such a mix of competing identities, Christian perspectives on images in those five centuries were never monolithic. Images were commonly used within pagan worship, which gave instant suspicion to Christians discerning their use.

In this time period, one of the most heated opponents of images was Tertullian, a Christian apologist who probably lived between 160-225 C.E. His attacks were echoed in later centuries. "God is not pleased by what he himself did not produce. ... Those things which are not of God must be of his rival [the Devil]."[12] At issue for Tertullian was images' ability to attract and draw attention to themselves because of their beauty. Not only was the attraction to them sinful, but their beauty was sinful as well, since they were not part of God's creation (i.e. they came from humans' work). Opposite of this perspective is a more moderate approach from Origen, an early theologian who lived from 185-254 C.E., and is most often cited by Eastern Orthodox Christians. "Christians strive to raise altars and statues ... to be filled with the Spirit of God who dwells in [these] images of virtue ... and takes His abode in the soul which is conformed to the image of the Creator."[13] For Origen, the Spirit's presence, appearing with the internalizing of the Word of God, inspired images and made them living testaments to God and not idols as others suggested.

The second half-millennium of Christianity included more discernment and more controversy. In 600, Gregory the Great calmed a first wave of iconoclasm with these affirmations of images' ability to educate: "what scripture shows to those who read, a picture

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[12] Quoted in Freeberg 397.

[13] Origen, *Contra Celsus*, 8.18, http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/origen168.html (accessed April 3, 2009).

shows to the illiterate people as they see it; because in it the ignorant see what they ought to imitate, they who do now know letters can read it."[14] The controversy kept fermenting, however, until the eighth century in what are now known as the Byzantine Iconoclastic Controversies. The Byzantine establishment sponsored destruction of any images falsely representing Christ. Since the materials making up images lacked life, they believed the true icon of Christ was the Eucharist -- and any other image promoted idolatry.

This half-millennium has been called the time of monasticism, and fittingly, one of the theological rivals of the Byzantine iconoclasts was John of Damascus - a monk. John defended images by using the incarnation as a test of faith: if you denied images of Christ, you denied God, since Christ was the archetype and circumscription of God. Margaret Miles, a historian, puts John Damascene's theological work in perspective, when she explains the import of John's defense of images:

> The incarnation of Jesus Christ, God entering the sensible world in a human body, decisively ratified the depiction of the spiritual world in anthropomorphic form. It became possible and important for artistic images to represent the incarnation, an effective reminder of the historical event, capable of attracting the worshipper's attention and affection to the figure represented.[15]

John stressed images' ability to remember and remind - no matter the economic class of the viewer: "[the Israelites] were of course not worshiping the [images] themselves, they were being led through them to recall the wonderful works of God, and to adore him whose works they had witnessed."[16] In theory, the controversies ended with the Second Council of Nicaea in 787; in practice, however, iconoclasm was only abated for some decades and some centuries until future

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[14] Quoted in Freedberg 398.

[15] Miles 143.

[16] Quoted in Freedberg 401; *Oratio* I.94.1248c-d

flare-ups. In 787, the council said it was proper to venerate images, but not to adore them. Images receive honor only relative to their prototypes (what they represent).

The third half-millennium lacks many important changes in the status of images. Often, however, Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153 C.E.) is quoted for a letter in which he advises an abbot of a Cistercian monastery against adorning churches with images. But as art historian David Freedberg points out, the letter is "rather a warning against excessive luxuriousness in the adornment of churches ... [and to] keep the matter of poverty and expenditure on art in proportion."[17] The issue was an ethical, not a theological one. The evolution of the misunderstanding is on a magnitude like that of the apostle Paul writing in 1 Corinthians 11.27 that those who eat and drink unworthily bring judgement upon themselves. In both Bernard's and Paul's letter, the issue is not with the practice itself but with the neglect of the poor and hungry.

The fourth half-millennium began with the Protestant Reformation. The split on images' status did not happen just between Catholics and Lutherans, but also between Lutherans and Calvinists. The debate on emphasis of the commandment against idols in the Decalogue fell along party lines. Jarsolav Pelikan, a historian of Christianity, shows that both Lutherans and Roman Catholics lumped this commandment with the first commandment to wholly honor God. Calvinists (and Zwinglians) kept it as a separate commandment. The issue's import was not great theologically, until Protestant iconoclasts who subscribed to Calvin's theology started purging churches of crucifixes in favor of bare crosses. Caught between the warring sides, Luther opted to retain images. John Eck, a Catholic apologist, in the heat of the debates saw no

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[17] Freedberg 301.

difference between Luther and Calvin on the issue, but "later commended [Luther] for his defense of images against the radicals."[18] Bullinger, a reformer close in thought to Calvin, attacked Luther and lumped him in with the Catholics. Luther, however, was not for all images. He appreciated the value of narrative images so, a la Gregory the Great, the images could be the bible for the illiterate. But the narratives proper to be imaged were to come from the Old Testament. And even Calvin and Zwingli were sympathetic to this as well.[19] At the root of the reformers' common suspicion is that the divine cannot be circumscribed and that any attempts to do so would dumb the senses and corrupt people from encountering the sacred. There is a base theological anthropology that has spanned all of the history I have given in this abridged account. Human beings are prone to idolatry; human beings have appetites both for images and for the divine, and the risk is that human beings will confuse the two. This theological anthropology is not just 'our' human problem, however. When the incarnation enters the theological mix, the question starts to form: how can these human needs can be satisfied and yet still aroused? I see Paul Tillich's theological device of the "symbol" linking the human needs of the divine and of images with God's willingness to redeem those needs while saving us from our own idolatry.

Tillich's "Symbol": toward a Protestant Theology of Images

Paul Tillich is a theological giant for many reasons: his hallmark method of correlation, his ontology answering the threat of non-being, even his labeling of human affinities for the ultimate. Underneath all of these theological exercises, however, is "the symbol." This section of the paper explains the wider context of Tillich's theology (including courage, idolatry, the

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[18] Pelikan 247.

[19] Freedberg 399.

goodness of creation, and symbolic understandings of God). It is in understanding his wider theology that his use of “symbol” becomes understandable. This section explores Tillich's use of "symbol” and then finishes by looking at Tillich's writings on art.

Tillich is interested in human creatures' ultimate concerns. The "ultimate concern" is not, at least initially, a synonymous word for God. The ultimate concern varies with the individual. A concern is ultimate when persons love it with their whole heart, soul, mind, and strength. A concern is ultimate when persons believe it is infinite and worship it. So a person's ultimate concern is his or her god. Whether that god is the same God Christians worship is a different matter; but in any case, God would not be God if God were not already a person's ultimate concern.

Humans take risks when they worship. In worship, they affirm something as ultimate by giving it their trust and allegiance. In doing so, they risk idolatry if the object of their worship is actually finite and limited. Humans worship because of anxiety; they worship out of the threat of non-being. So it takes courage to worship. Worship entails risk. And so, for Tillich, it is inevitable that human beings will lapse into idolatry and prove themselves polytheists. There is something about being human - about *being* - that finds security in taking the risk and worshipping. To worship is to be free to affirm something as ultimate.

Humans are part of God’s good creation. As the iconoclastic controversies of the eighth century showed, it could no longer be assumed that all of creation is theologically good; the distrust of matter (and the distrust inherited from earlier thinkers) called the goodness of creation into question. And the statements in the previous paragraph may also call this into question for Tillich: if humans always risk idolatry, then is creation in fact good? If human beings have an

orientation toward practices which can be idolatrous, then would Tillich use the notion of a "fall" to describe the current non-goodness of creation? Tillich uses the category of "estranged existence" where other theologians might use language of a fallen humanity, but Tillich means something very different by it. Tillich refuses to believe that there was ever a non-estranged existent creation. "Actualized creation and estranged existence are identical. ... Creation is good in its essential character. If actualized, it falls into universal estrangement through freedom and destiny."[20] Once humans exist, they are automatically going to be estranged. Even in their estrangement, they are still part of God's good creation.

So if humans are insecure because of the ambiguities of existence (and the threat of non-existence), and if as part of God's good creation humans still want to claim something as ultimate in order to hold their insecurity at bay, then how do they make those claims? Humans use symbols to claim something as ultimate.

Symbols are the resource for all theological talk. It is in symbols that humans speak. Tillich gives six characteristics of symbols: (1) the symbol points beyond itself to something else; (2) the symbol participates in that to which it points; (3) the symbol opens up levels of reality which otherwise are closed for us; (4) the symbol unlocks dimensions and elements of our soul which correspond to the dimensions and elements of reality; (5) the symbol cannot be produced intentionally (it must grow out of and be accepted by the unconscious dimension of our being); (6) the symbol grows and dies (they grow when the situation is ripe for them, and they die when the situation changes).[21]

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[20] Tillich, *I* 44.

[21] These were all labeled as clearly and cleanly as here in Tillich, *Dynamics* 47-49.

Tillich understands symbols as bigger than such descriptions may allude to. Symbols are organic in that they grow out of the needs of the humans they serve. But symbols are ideas and metaphors and devices. Symbols are not physical, biologically perceivable things. Symbols are not images. Symbols are a way of understanding. Tillich distinguishes symbols, however, from categories.[22] Categories are ways of understanding by giving limits and borders to a substance -- symbols participate in and point to what they symbolize. Symbols are part of the reality - part of the content.

If all the prior conversation about symbols sounds too abstract, then this is ironic, because it is in tandem with what Tillich says is the starting point of theology: to speak as unsymbolically and abstractly as possible. "Theologians must make explicit what is implicit in religious thought and expression; and, in order to do this, they must begin with the most abstract and completely unsymbolic statement which is possible, namely, that God is being-itself or the absolute."[23] (Tasks like this show why I appreciate the arts more than theology, but that it is a discussion for a different paper.) "The symbol" fits into Tillich's theology because it is the basis for talk about God. Even though he says in the above quote that theologians strive to be as unsymbolic as possible, he goes on to say "there can be no doubt that any concrete assertion about God must be symbolic, for a concrete assertion is one which uses a segment of finite experience in order to say something about [God]."[24] Concrete existence - at an unconscious level - forms all symbols, including religious symbols.

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[22] Tillich, *I* 238. Tillich makes this distinction in the unfolding of a major principle of his philosophy of religion. He explains how God as the "first cause" is symbolic and not categorical. While the difference is not clear in this section, in other sections of his *Systematic* Tillich talks of categories as though they are symbols that do not participate in the reality they symbolize. Categories are the frameworks; symbols are the whole package.

[23] Tillich, *I* 239.

[24] Tillich, *I* 239.

Tillich's understanding of symbol is important to a Protestant theology of images because of the ways it meshes with arguments against idolatry. Disciples suspicious of images' theological value might object that images too readily center the focus on themselves and do not point to a reality nor participate in the divine. Using Tillich's understanding of symbol, I would agree with them, save for a few caveats: (a) symbols for Tillich are huge (i.e. grace, Spirit, kingdom, eternal life) -- a theory where images are types of symbols is not even intelligible with Tillich's symbol; (b) images do point to a reality -- whether they participate in it is another matter; (c) behind such suspicion these Disciples question whether symbols are always a form of idolatry. This, particularly, is where Tillich is helpful. Humans are prone to idolize finite things, and symbols can participate in the reality they symbolize, but cannot themselves *be* that reality. Are symbols, not then, "just symbols" or any affirmation of them automatically idolatry? Tillich denies it! "The phrase 'only a symbol' should be avoided, because nonanalogous or nonsymbolic knowledge of God has *less* truth than analogous or symbolic knowledge."[25] Humans know by symbols. Humans do not worship symbols, but when they do worship, they affirm religious symbols as the expression of their faith.

The value of symbols comes in the form of answering anxieties. This is similar to the need to worship; we worship to answer our anxieties. Similarly, we unconsciously accept the symbols that have grown from our needs. Symbols respond to the ambiguities of existence. "The ambiguities of life are manifest under all dimensions, in all processes, and all realms of life."[26] The best symbols are unambiguous ones. Religion is ambiguous. Daily life is full of ambiguity.

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[25] Tillich, *I* 131. Tillich is giving this in the context of denying that a natural theology can be extracted from any finite section of creation. He argues that the *analogia entis* needs finite content in order to make revelation understandable.

[26] Tillich, *III* 107.

Tillich identifies three religious symbols as attempts to symbolize unambiguous lives: "Spirit of God, Kingdom of God, and Eternal Life."[27] Each of these answers an ambiguity; and all three are interconnected and inclusive of the others in their answers. So, Tillich sees "Spiritual Presence as the answer to the ambiguities of the human spirit and its functions, Kingdom of God as the answer to the ambiguities of history, and Eternal Life as the answer to the ambiguities of life universal."[28] They answer the ambiguities by pulling from the lived experiences (personal, social, political/religious) of the humans who have already unconsciously accepted them as symbols. Symbols point the way to self-transcendence so that individuals can have referents for their hopes for unambiguity.

The line between symbolic and nonsymbolic appears when what was thought to be symbolic does not point further. For Tillich, all theology is symbolic until it reaches the point of defining God as "being-itself." Talking of God as the "ground of being" is still symbolic. Tillich comments that "[ground] oscillates between cause and substance and transcends them both."[29] Saying that God is the "ground of being" refuses to let God be defined as fully separate or fully identified with existence. There is still a quality of mystery with all symbols; even though they participate in that which they symbolize, they maintain an elusive character. But something is non-symbolic when it fails to point beyond itself. The statement "God is 'being-itself'" is the underlying structure upon which all symbols of God must form. "Being" is a concept, and "being-itself" is the root concept that points to nothing further than itself. Even "ground" is

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[27] *Ibid.*

[28] Tillich, *III* 357.

[29] Tillich, *I* 156.

more symbolic than this root. So "being-itself" is non-symbolic, meaning that it is the root of theology.

If this discussion has become even more abstract, it can be brought to a more finite level with an example of a symbol. Humans symbolize God. Tillich is clear in his explanation of this:

> Man is a self who has a world. As a self he is an individual person who participates universally, he is a dynamic, self-transcending agent within a special and a general form, and he is freedom which has a special destiny and which participates in a general destiny. Therefore, man symbolizes that which is his ultimate concern in terms taken from his own being. ... God is called a person, but he is a person not in finite separation but in an absolute and unconditional participation in everything. God is also called dynamic, but he is dynamic not in tension with form but in an absolute and unconditional unity with form so that his self-transcendence never is in tension with his self-preservation, so that he always remains God. God is called "free," but he is free not in an arbitrariness but in an absolute and unconditional identity with his destiny, so that he himself is his destiny, so that the essential structures of being are not strange to his freedom but are the actuality of his freedom.[30]

Symbols for Tillich go beyond mere tangible, material objects -- they are bigger than that. Symbols are not arbitrary, nor can humans make them at-will. Symbols come from the material of experience and while they participate in the reality they symbolize, they can also never encompass nor fully represent such a reality.

The Protestant Principle (against Idolatry)

Before looking at some of Tillich's specific thoughts on images, I should point out one of the most important characteristics of Tillich's theology. (For Protestants this is essential.) Any

[30] Tillich, *I* 243-244. Tillich is giving this theology within the context of describing "God as living." He is trying to make such a statement intelligible while also explaining the process by which symbols become intelligible. In this section, he describes an ontological polarity structure (terms of 'subject' and terms of 'object'), which has - in lack of a better word - integrity. Tillich says that symbolization happens in the 'subject' realm. He says that all symbols come from the material of the human experience, but still represents the similarity and the ultimate mystery of the qualities when symbolizing God.

symbols must also be open to critique, and at the same time be agents of critique. This impulse is often identified as the "Protestant principle" (as opposed, for Tillich, to Catholic substance).

The Protestant principle is a demand that any object of worship (be it God, the Church, individual humans, or images) that is not truly God must be stricken down. "The Protestant principle is the restatement of the prophetic principle as an attack against a self-absolutizing and, consequently, demonically distorted church. Both prophets and reformers announced the radical implications of exclusive monotheism."[31] To have God, the ultimate concern, be worshipped along with finite concerns (thought to be ultimate) is an abomination. Idolatry, whether the idol is an image, sacraments, the Bible, creeds, or any other form should always be protested. Likewise, any limitation on God or any attempt for containment is also ripe for protest.

The extended quote above from Tillich illustrates part of this Protestant principle. Not only is it possible to affirm the substance (in this case, the presence of God), but it is possible to affirm that the substance of the relationship (in this case, between humans and God) passes between the symbol and that which is symbolized. But the Protestant principle makes it important to admit that humans symbolizing God *does not* make sense. When Tillich makes qualifications on most of the properties of God are an example of this. As much as can be known about God symbolically, even that is never a comprehensive type of knowledge. Human symbols can never be exhaustive knowledge about God.

Symbols determine not only theology, but also give boundaries to churches. Just as every act of seeing also includes an act of blindness, a church choosing its historically-conditioned symbols chooses to exclude others. And this exclusion is a form of idolatry. Such exclusion is

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[31] Tillich, *I* 227.

unavoidable, but it is still idolatrous. Churches are able to be changed (and faithful) with an element of self-critique: "In criticizing its own symbols the church expresses its dependence on the Spiritual Community, its fragmentary character, and the continuous threat of falling into the ambiguities of religion which it is supposed to fight."[32] Just as the idolatry is unavoidable, so the critique of it should also be unavoidable.

It is important to acknowledge that both a Protestant principle and a Catholic substance are necessary for faith. God can be found in symbols and through symbols -- but the symbols are never God. Any time a symbol makes a claim that it is absolute, and likewise any time a symbol fails to point beyond itself, it is idolatry. Idolatry is not the opposite of genuine faith. It is a type of that faith. "The risk of faith is that it could affirm a wrong symbol of ultimate concern, a symbol which does not really express ultimacy."[33] This is why the Protestant principle is especially necessary.

Tillich on Images

Tillich does not champion the visual by any stretch of the imagination; but at times he does give wise insights. Inside of his *Systematic Theology* volumes, Tillich's most direct views on images and visual art come as analogies for larger theological points or as commentary on what the church misses with its limited usage of images.

Tillich devotes much of volume II of his *Systematic* to questions about Christ. In trying to explain the inevitable disappointments of quests for the historical Jesus, Tillich contrasts photographs, painted pictures, and expressionistic portraits. He downplays the first two when he

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[32] Tillich, *III* 206.

[33] Tillich, *II* 117.

explains that scholars seeking clear snapshots of Jesus or composites from corroborating historical sources of the time will all be disappointed. The attainable image (and the ideal encounter with Christ) comes in the form of the expressionist painting. Tillich uses the term "expressionist" in a way that differs from a definition art historians might use. Art historians might insist on some aesthetic quality or style when talking about expressionism; Tillich, instead, focuses on the way the images are made. An expressionistic understanding of Jesus would require an intentional choosing of details knowable only through deep experience and engagement with the subject matter (in this case, Christ). In an expressionist portrayal, the portrayal says as much about the portrayer as it does the subject portrayed. An expressionistic portrait would use the deep, personal participation of the artist in

> such a way that [the subject of the portrait's] surface traits are neither reproduced as in photography (or naturalistically imitated), nor idealized according to the painter's ideal of beauty but one used to express what the painter has experienced through his participation in the being of his subject.[34]

This is Tillich's ideal style and ideal process for creating both literary and visual portraits of Christ. But he says something about the church's deficiency in the visual as well. "Protestantism ... has continued and often surpassed the achievement of the early and medieval churches with respect to religious music and hymnical poetry but ... has fallen very short in their creative power in all the visual arts"[35] In this strong scolding, Tillich sees Protestants' visual deficiency as a side-effect of their achieved reform. He notes that the reduction of the sacraments, the encouragement of full congregational participation, and the emphasis of music while also condemning images has excluded the validity of the visual communicating the

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[34] Tillich, *II* 115.

[35] Tillich, *III* 200.

Spiritual presence. But Tillich does not want reform to end in such a state: "The Spiritual Presence makes itself felt in the architectural space, the liturgical music and language, the pictorial and sculptural representations, the solemn character of the gestures of all participants, and so on."[36] In the end, theologically, this leads to one of my conclusions: regardless of whether a church has images or not, those images cannot separate the human beings from God's love and the Holy Spirit's felt presence.

In addition to Tillich's treatment of images in his *Systematic*, he also has an adventurous article called "Art and the Ultimate Reality." In the article, Tillich treats ultimate reality in a similar way to ultimate concern. His prior definition of reality was "the never finished creation of man's cultural activity. There is no 'reality in itself' behind this creation."[37] In the article, Tillich says humans seek ultimate reality because of our awareness "of the deceptive character of the surface of everything we encounter which drives [us] to discover what is below the surface."[38] Labeling reality as "ultimate" means that God includes it, since God is, after all, ultimate. Ultimate reality is what is seen through the translucence of creation. Every physical thing symbolizes ultimate reality. Humans are able to know the difference between the symbol and what it symbolizes, and as such, they know that no symbol perfectly displays what it symbolizes. But what about expressions of symbols? Can images ever show ultimate reality? Tillich says no. Humanity tries to find ultimate reality through three arenas[39]: philosophy, art, and religion. He says philosophy and art are indirect methods, but religion is the only direct one

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[36] Tillich, *III* 198.

[37] Tillich, *III* 353.

[38] Tillich, *Art* 220.

[39] My term, not his.

because it expresses ultimate reality "through ecstatic experiences of a concrete-revelatory character and is expressed in symbols and myths."[40] Tillich then goes to express five configurations of religion and artistic styles to show comparisons and contrasts of how they express ultimate reality. The types are: (1) sacramental religion/primitive art, (2) mystical religion/non-objective stylistic art, (3) prophetic religion/critical realism art, (4) religious humanism/idealism art, (5) ecstatic-spiritual religion/expressionistic art. In the end, expressionism (as mentioned earlier in this paper) is his ideal type. "[The expressionistic element] breaks through both the realistic acceptance of the given and the idealistic anticipation of the fulfilled. And beyond both of them it reaches into the depth of ultimate reality."[41]

There are two places I disagree with Tillich. One disagreement is an issue of word choice; the other disagreement is on the function of images in memory. Rather than keeping the symbol and image semantic domains separate, Tillich combines them: "The content of the artistic symbols (poetic, musical, visual) is the religious symbols given the original revelatory experiences and by the traditions based on them."[42] His statement helps explain the relationship of art to symbols, but by referring to art as symbol, he weakens his point that symbols rise from the unconscious and are not actively, intentionally made. Art *is* made; there are artists (conscious creators); symbols, however, do not have active creators. Choosing a word like "representation," "expression," or "portrayal" might have helped minimize the confusion of the seemingly contradictory meaning of "symbol."

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[40] Tillich, *Art* 221.

[41] Tillich, *Art* 235.

[42] Tillich, *III* 197.

"We must say that God always speaks in medium. ... The thinking mind thinks in words."[43] Tillich says that people think in words, but I postulate that memory functions differently. The mind imagines; it thinks in mental images. This may contradict my first section on how to define images (and hence, proved the prior paragraph moot), but I maintain that words are not the content of thought. "Idea" comes from one of the Greek verbs for "to see." Memory, in turn, works because it has a narrative structure.[44] Humans remember stories made of symbols and myths. But we do even more than this; Sontag observes, "to remember is, more and more, not to recall a story but to be able to call up a picture."[45] Words do not exhaust God's medium; even "the word" (or "the Word") is not exhaustive enough. God's medium includes images.

Conclusion

Humans are created by God with eyes to see, with ears to hear, and with reason to imagine. Reason is how humans know the realities of their existence; it is what they use to interpret the symbols that undergird all knowledge. Reason is also what creates idols. The human being is a perpetual factory of idols, as John Calvin famously opined. We were created by God, endowed with the imaginations to be such factories.

The human urge to idolize is not only possible but also probable. This is why the "Protestant principle" is necessary as a corrective theological practice. Idolatry happens; and it often cannot be prevented. Living faithfully as a Christian means that Christians must worship God, whom they affirm as ultimate. Christians are not always right. We miss the mark and commit idolatry

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[43] Tillich, *III* 127.

[44] This psychological insight came from my Survey Questionnaire Design course in Fall 2008.

[45] Sontag 89.

when we claim as ultimate a god that is not God. The symbols we endow as ultimate must be open for critique and be able to instigate critique. When Christians worship, they risk being wrong, trusting that God will make them right.

Images represent symbols, and as such, they share the traits of symbols. Images should point beyond themselves in order to not become idolatrous. Images should participate in the viewing experience -- so that when a person experiences the content of the image, that person partially experiences the reality of that content. Images should open up their contents to viewers, but also return the gaze so that viewers are invited to reflexively see something new about their own reality. Images' veracity depends on the fittingness of their style; so throughout time, images have their beginnings and their endings in their quest to represent symbols. These are the traits of symbols and the traits of images. The closer the resemblance of images to their symbols (in function and not verisimilitude[46]), the easier viewers can avoid idolizing those images.

Norwalk Christian Church is an interesting case study because it is so close to my sensibilities: its images *shaped* my sensibilities. As a photographer, I respond to light. As a minister, I respond to the creative use of symbols. NCC's stained glass windows use both light and symbols to frame the church's faith. Many artists would insist on using human figures to show the reception of the ten commandments, the birth and baptism of Jesus, the last supper communion practices, and Christ's crucifixion and resurrection. But NCC's windows taught me that the shape of a human body is not necessary to show these grand divine-human events. The

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[46] Verisimilitude means how true or real the images appear to be. In art theory, the term also denotes how hard it is to distinguish between the image and what it represents. Something has higher verisimilitude the more "realistic" the image seems.

windows interact with light to showcase the symbols. This interaction need not focus on the image or the symbol to the detriment of the other.

All Christians should discern images' theological potentials and dangers -- and that discernment should happen in their Christian communities. Tillich's understanding of "symbol" aids in that discernment process when it is paired with the "Protestant principle." They both help acknowledge Christians' needs for substantive and tangible tokens of their faith; they both also help control the urge to idolatry. The theological grounding that comes from this discernment prepares the way for the necessary ethical and aesthetic discernment that must follow. After all this discernment, responses like iconoclasm are indefensible.

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